

A Rare Look Inside Burma

An Interview with Alan Clements



Alan Clements, 39, managed a rare unescorted tour through the closed society of Burma late last year. A practitioner of Buddhism who studied in Rangoon in the late 1970s and 1980s as the first American Buddhist monk. Clements visited freedom fighters near the Thai-Burma border, in the jungle area held by the Karen National Union. He also managed to stray away from his official tour group in Rangoon, where he renewed contacts with Buddhist monks and opposition leaders. Back in Larkspur, California, Clements, both a Buddhist meditation teacher and lecturer on the integration of Buddhism, activism and human rights, spoke to NEWSWEEKS' Nadine Joseph. Excerpts:

JOSEPH: How has the country changed since your last visit in 1988, just before the August 8th nationwide pro-democracy demonstrations and the massacres that followed?

CLEMENTS: You enter Rangoon and you see a city that has never looked better. All the buildings have been painted for the first time in years. There are new hotels, widened roads that are newly asphalted, new parks, gardens, and bridges. Rangoon has had a completely superficial change of face. All over Rangoon, you see the large red-and-white lettered propaganda billboards: LOVE AND CHERISH THE MOTHERLAND, THE MILITARY IS HERE TO PROTECT THE PEOPLE FROM ALL RIOTOUS AND DESTRUCTIVE ELEMENTS, ONLY THROUGH DISCIPLINE WILL DEMOCRACY BE WON. It's a way of painting over the blood and suffering.

Food prices have escalated, gasoline prices have soared to \$25 a gallon and the quality and quantity of food are seriously diminished. SLORC (the State Law and Order Restoration Council, as the military regime is known) has outlawed groups of five people or more from meeting publicly and a woman filmmaker described to me how she has seen police shoot into a group of pre-teenage children, killing a 10 year old boy.

The Burmese cannot move around the country. They are kept hostage. The country lives in paranoia. Every one of my contacts told me that the Burmese secret police are undercover everywhere throughout the country.

What did your contacts tell you about political changes in Burma?

AC: The contacts I met with, in secret, behind closed doors, feared for their lives. People told me that the prisons are filled with political prisoners. I was told of 19 known centers of torture around the country. There are “satellite villages,” which are SLORC labels for disease-ridden-concentration camps. Escapees in the jungle told me of widespread starvation, cruelty, and disease within them. One ex-minister, an old friend, was panicked at the idea of talking about politics. Several of his friends were “missing.” He talked about one satellite village to which 150,000 Rangoon residents had been forcibly moved.

Were you able to meet with any of the country’s democratically elected leaders?

AC: Although 400 or more parliamentarians were elected in May 1990, most of them are jailed or in exile. I met with leaders by crossing from Thailand into the jungle areas along the Thai-Burmese border. It was at the time they announced that they had formed an interim parallel government, headed by Prime Minister Sein Win, whom I met. They also announced for the first time in recent Burmese history that all 21 ethnic minorities had unified to overthrow SLORC. .

What has happened to the students who demonstrated in the streets of Rangoon and Mandalay in August 1988?

AC: While I was in the jungle, I met some of these university students. After the military-led slaughter of demonstrators they were the first to flee the country and were chased for weeks through the jungle areas of Burma—killed, brutalized, tortured, beaten beyond imagination. Those who survived now live under the most deplorable conditions imaginable in 13 remote jungle encampments along the Thai-Burmese border. These students are the intelligentsia of Burma, the Ph.D.s, the doctors, the lawyers, poets and artists. And here they’ve been huddled in these malaria-infested jungle encampments subsisting for two years. I spoke to one student who had a severe case of malaria. The student next to him said, “That’s not the only thing he has,” and lifted his blanket and he had his leg blown off from a bullet wound. He lifted his shirt sleeve; he had a bullet through his arm. He lifted his shirt; he had a 10-inch shrapnel scar in his chest. Lifted up his hair, and he had a bullet hole in his neck. He was 15 years old. He was a ninth grader in a Rangoon school before fleeing to the jungle after his brother and sister had been killed. He himself died the next day.

How did you get out of Burma?

AC: Knowing the underground police tactics, one Burmese official felt that I would be set up at the airport. That way they could kill two birds with one stone and have proof of whom I saw. When I left my rendezvous point (which cannot be disclosed), I was with a close friend whose brother was missing. But I was very suspicious of the other person with us, a woman who kept staring at me. She gave me this Buddhist book, “Discourses on the Buddha,” on my way to the airport. I didn’t know whether to take it or not, because I didn’t want to look like I’d been to a rendezvous to talk. I just held the book in my hand in the taxi, already paranoid about being detained. Finally, I looked inside the book and it said in Burmese, which I read: “This American has been at such-and-such location speaking about politics. Detain him.” Then in English: “...Best Regards” and her name. I threw the book out immediately.

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